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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the debate on whether day care is harmful or beneficial to infants by describing some of the realities of child care for infants in Massachusetts circa 1987. Randomly sampled were 750 Massachusetts families with children under 13. Respondents were interviewed by phone about child care arrangements and family demographics. Respondents were statistically representative of all families in the state that had at least one child under the age of 13. Interviewed families had a total of 1,281 children; of these, 252 were infants up to 2 years old. These 252 infants statistically represented the population of infants in the state in 1987. Findings concern: (1) maternal employment and child care; (2) hours of care; (3) the unmet need for infant child care; (4) patterns of infant care; and (5) variations in the use of infant child care. Data revealed that both maternal employment and regular child care were the norm for older infants in Massachusetts in 1987, and were a common occurrence for infants up to 12 months of age. Almost half of infants' mothers were employed in the first year of the infant's life; over half were employed in the second year. Families with employed parents used several techniques to manage employment and child care. Married women were as likely as single mothers to use child care. Social class differences were found in the types of child care used. (RH)

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INFANT CHILD CARE IN MASSACHUSETTS:

RESULTS OF A 1987 SURVEY

Nancy Marshall

1988

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The research reported here uses data from the 1987 Massachusetts Child Care Survey. This survey was conducted by the Center for Survey Research, University of Massachusetts, for the Child Day Care Affordability Project. The Affordability Project was funded by the Massachusetts Office for Children and the United Way of Massachusetts Bay.

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Infant Child Care in Massachusetts: Results of a 1987 Survey

Maternal employment has been rising steadily since the turn of the century. The rise has not been limited to mothers of older children -- half of all infants now have employed mothers. For decades, rising maternal employment has been accompanied by concern about the children of employed mothers. Recently, this concern has focused on the wellbeing of infants in child care and, in particular, on the potential damage to infants' emotional attachment and development as a result of the separations associated with maternal employment (c.f., Belsky, 1986).

The debate about whether or not day care is harmful to infants raises several issues. First, we must carefully define "day care". When policy makers and parents ask if day care is harmful, they are asking several questions at once. They may be asking if any non-parental care is harmful, or if care by non-relatives is harmful, or if group care in day care centers is harmful. This variety of meanings for the term "day care" is indicative of the lack of clarity about the actual experiences of young children with adults other than their parents, and a lack of clarity about the ranges of child care patterns that families use. It also reflects the assumption that all children, prior to the rising rates of maternal employment, lived in families where their mothers were the only caretaker. In fact, in the past as well as the present, children in working class families and in certain ethnic groups spent portions of their time each week with caretakers other than their mothers, whether or not their mothers are employed (c.f., Marshall, 1986; Stack, 1974). Any debate about infant child care must be clear about the actual care arrangements of the children of employed mothers, as well as those of the children of mothers who are not employed.

Second, the level of concern about the effects on children of maternal employment and child care is tied to the extent to which maternal employment and child care are normative experiences. When a critical mass of families experience the same events, such events can lose their shock value. Parental and policymaker concern about child care is partly driven today by the fact that most people are not aware of the extent to which child care is a part of the lives of young children. If child care were seen as a normative experience, the issue might then become how best to guarantee the quality of their experiences.

Finally, when we argue about the impact of infant child care, we must put it in the context of a family where the mother's employment is crucial to maintaining a standard of living that used to be taken for granted for middle class American families with only one income. Indeed, for many families the mother's income is necessary to keep them out of poverty or to meet basic needs. For these families to forego child care would mean increased financial stress which would also have a negative impact on the children.

These issues must all be addressed before we can properly answer the question "Is day care harmful to infants?". This paper contributes to this discussion by describing some of the realities of child care for infants in Massachusetts.

Infant Child Care in Massachusetts

In June of 1987, a random sample of 750 Massachusetts families with children under 13 were interviewed by phone about their child care arrangements, as well as other family demographics. These families are statistically representative of all families in Massachusetts who had at least one child under the age of 13.

These families had a total of 1281 children. Of these, 252 were infants (ages 0 to 24 months).[1] These 252 infants statistically represent the population of infants in Massachusetts in 1987. This paper describes the child care arrangements for these infants.

Maternal Employment and Child Care

Over half (52%) of the mothers of infants in this state are employed, according to our survey. Almost half (48%) of these women work full-time (30 or more hours each week). One fifth are employed between 21 and 29 hours a week; an equal amount work 15 to 20 hours a week.

As Table 1 shows, mothers of infants 0 to 12 months old are slightly less likely to be employed than mothers of older infants (48% vs. 61% employed). In addition, infants under one year are much less likely to be in non-parental care, even when their mothers are employed. The families who are not using regular child care are able to have both parents in the labor force through a combination of part-time employment for the mother and/or juggled work schedules that allow one or the other parent to be home with the child.

Table 1
Maternal Employment of Infants

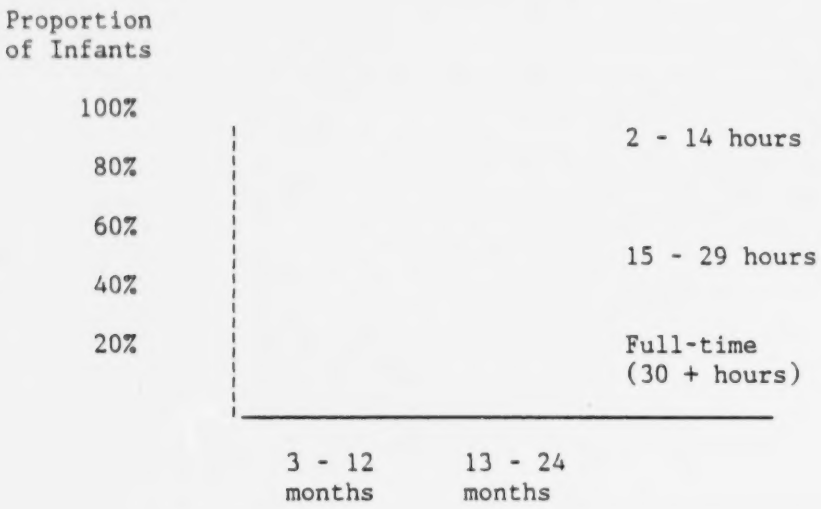
Age of Child	Proportion with Employed Mothers	Proportion In Care	Total N in Sample
0 - 3 months	39%	35%	9
4 - 6 months	52%	41%	29
7 - 9 months	46%	36%	28
10 - 12 months	52%	34%	29
13 - 15 months	60%	60%	30
16 - 18 months	67%	50%	18
19 - 21 months	54%	58%	24
22 - 24 months	61%	61%	28

[1] See "The Affordability of Child Day Care in Massachusetts: Technical Report" for more information about the survey.

Hours of Care

All told, 43% of infants are in some type of regular child care.[2] Over one third of these infants (38%) are in full-time child care (30 hours or more each week). An additional one quarter (24%) are in care 15 to 29 hours a week. Infants under the age of 1 year are as likely as older infants to be in full-time child care.

Figure 1:
Hours Of Child Care Per Week



The Unmet Need for Infant Child Care

Child care is still needed for an additional 42% of infants whose mothers are not employed. These infants' mothers report that they would look for work or enter school or a job training program if satisfactory, affordable child care were available.

Almost half of all parents (43%) of infants reported that one or more problems with child care had affected their employment in the past year. The most commonly mentioned problem was the lack of available child care, mentioned by the parents of one third of the infants. One fourth had problems with the quality of available care and almost as many had trouble with the cost of infant care.

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[2] We have limited our discussion to "regular child care" -- care while the parents are at work or on a regular weekly basis. We did not include spur-of-the moment arrangements, or occasional babysitting.

Table 2
Problems With Infant Child Care

Problem	Proportion of Infants	N in Sample
Availability	33%	81
Quality	27%	67
Cost	24%	59

* Information on this question was missing for four infants out of 252.

Patterns of Infant Care

The greatest proportion of infants in regular child care are cared for by relatives. Another 23% are in day care centers or nursery schools and 25% are in family day care homes. Finally, an additional 17% of infants are cared for by babysitters in the family home.

Table 3
Types of Infant Child Care

Type of Care	Proportion in Care[1]	N in Sample
Center-based	23%	26
Relatives	38%	43
Family Day Care	25%	28
Sitter in Home	17%	19

[1] Percents represent the proportion of infants in child care who are in this type of care arrangement. Percents will add to more than 100 because a child could be in more than one form of care.

Infants in day care centers or nursery schools are cared for in groups with an average staff/child ratio of 1 staff to every 4 children.[3] About half of the infants are in small classrooms with only one adult and two to six children. The other half of the infants are in classrooms with two to five adults and six to twenty children.[4]

A majority of relatives (60%) are caring for only one infant -- these relatives are probably the grandmother of the child. Other relatives care for the infant plus other children, who are either the infant's older siblings or the relative's own young children. Almost two thirds of relative care is in the infant's home; only one quarter (27%) of it is paid in cash.[5]

Unlike care by relatives, care by non-relatives in someone else's home is paid care. Most of the infants in these family day care homes are in unlicensed homes.[6] Family day care homes generally have only one adult care provider. Almost all of the infants (88%) are in homes with other children at home during the day; most of these providers are home with their own children and taking care of an additional child or two. Over two thirds (69%) of the infants are in homes where the providers are watching three or more children.

Seventeen percent of infants are cared for by a sitter in the infant's home. This care is paid care; all but one infant in our sample was the only child being watched by the babysitter.

Variations in the Use of Infant Child Care

Not all families are equally likely to use infant child care. Obviously, families where the mother is employed are more likely to use child care; however, only 72% of such families do so. In addition, infants with mothers who are unemployed but seeking work are more likely to be in care than other infants with mothers not employed -- presumably because they were in care before their mother became unemployed, or because their mother has placed them in care anticipating employment. The number of hours of employment are also important -- women who work more than 15 hours a week are more likely than women who work part-time to use infant care. In addition, infants in homes with other female relatives present (usually the child's grandmother) are more

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[3] Only teachers, teacher aides, and other direct care staff are included here. This information, and the following section, is based on parents' reports.

[4] Some of these infants are considered toddlers by the licensing regulations of the state Office for Children -- the largest classrooms are probably toddler classes.

[5] Parents may reimburse relatives in other ways, through non-cash services or goods.

[6] Licensed family day care homes must meet minimum state standards for safety and quality, and observe state regulations of the number of children allowed in one home.

likely to be in regular child care.

While employment and the availability of a relative for child care are significantly related to whether or not a mother uses infant child care, her social class (as measured by her education) and whether or not she is married are not related. Women at all educational levels are equally likely to use infant child care. Similarly, married women are as likely as single mothers to use regular infant child care.

Table 4
Variations in the Use of Infant Care

Factor	Proportion of Infants in Care	Chi-square
1. Hours Mother Employed:		93.97 **
None	14%	
1 - 15 / week	45%	
16 + / week	78%	
2. Female Kin in Household:		5.31 *
only mother	42%	
in addition to mother	67%	
3. Mother's Education:		NS
less than high school	43%	
High school diploma	36%	
More than high school	47%	
4. Marital Status:		
Married	43%	NS
Single	49%	

* $p < 0.05$
** $p < 0.001$

While the mother's level of education and her marital status are not related to whether or not her infant is in care in this sample, both factors are related to the type of care used. Mothers with more than a high school education are more likely to use day care centers or nursery schools for their infants, and more likely to use non-relative babysitters in the home. There is also a trend for mothers with less education to be more likely to use relatives. This is probably a function of the fact that poor and working class families have relatives available to them and are less able to afford paid child care.

In addition, single mothers are more likely to use day care centers or nursery schools. This latter finding may be a function of two facts: single mothers are more likely to work full-time and to need the stability of center-based care; and single mothers are more likely to be eligible for subsidized

care in centers, making center-based care affordable for them.

Table 5
Variations in Type of Care Used

	Education of Mother			Marital Status	
	Less Than High School	High School	More Than High School	Married	Single
Type of Care[1]					
Center-based	-	6%	15%*	8%	23%**
Relative	29%	17%	13%	16%	13%
Family day care	11%	13%	11%**	11%	13%
Babysitter	-	1%	12%	9%	3%
N	28	70	150	209	39

* groups are significantly different at $p < 0.05$
** groups are significantly different at $p < 0.005$

[1] Percents represent proportion of infants whose mothers have a given educational level or marital status. Columns will not add to 100% because infants not in care are not shown in table.

Summary

The data presented in this paper suggest several important conclusions about infant child care in Massachusetts. First, both maternal employment and regular child care are the norm for older infants in Massachusetts in 1987, and are a common occurrence for infants aged 0 to 12 months.

Second, mothers of infants are committed to employment. Almost half of infants' mothers are employed in the first year of the infant's life; over half are employed in the second year.

Finally, families with employed parents use several different techniques to manage employment and child care. Some families manage child care through the part-time employment of the mother, or through "tandem care" -- one parent works days and the other works nights so that a parent is always available for child care. However, almost three quarters of families in which the mother is employed use some other form of regular child care. The fact that married women are as likely as single mothers to use child care suggests that the employment demands on fathers, and the financial demands for mothers' labor, necessitate the use of non-parental care.

The information from this survey suggests that studies of infant day care must be done in the context of the changing U.S. family, where maternal employment is the norm and a family's standard of living depends on two incomes. The study also confirms the diversity of child care arrangements, and of social class differences in the types of child care used.

The parents' reports of the characteristics of their infants' child care settings raise additional issues. Relatives continue to be the backbone of our infant care arrangements. However, it is not clear that parents, or their relatives, would continue to opt for relative care if they could afford other forms of child care. Relative care tends to be less stable over time than licensed care arrangements.

Family day care arrangements with non-relatives tend to be unlicensed, and often involve providers caring for three or more children at a time, including the parent's infant. Other research (Howes, 1983; Marshall, et al, 1988) has documented the isolation and low pay of family day care providers. We need to know more about the quality of care in such settings.

Finally, babysitters in the home, used for almost one fifth of infants, are not regulated by the state and may therefore vary considerably in quality. They are also the most expensive form of care, and are used almost exclusively by middle class families.

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